Sailing in dangerous waters: piracy and raiding in historical context

Piracy and raiding in Southeast Asian waters have a long pedigree that time has done little to diminish. As late as 1994, memories of nineteenth century Tobelo raiders were used to frighten children into obedience in parts of central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The Tobelo, portrayed as merciless predators, were active in the nineteenth century, one of many groups for whom piracy was an important source of livelihood in eastern Indonesia’s ‘geography of coast’. This article examines how such groups functioned as part of the political system in eastern Indonesia and how this came to a temporary end with the maritime expansion of the colonial state in the nineteenth century.

State-condoned raiding

Wandering groups of armed men were a common sight in the eastern archipelago in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were active not only during periods of regional warfare but in relatively peaceful times. Raiders were one part of a mobile population engaged in a combination of raiding, political pursuits, trading and fishing. Such groups were often associated with larger regional centres and were especially active in the peripheries where they often formed alliances with local elites and settled for longer periods.

Raiding was not a sporadic, random activity but was closely related to the formation and functioning of regional spheres of influence and politics. The two main political centres in eastern Indonesia were Ternate and Bone. Their spheres of influence were based on alliances with tributaries and on ill-defined borders. Aristocrats, traders, fisher-folk and raiders. In contrast to the Dutch East India Company’s (VOC) ideal of a centrally managed system of political relations where peace-keeping and mediation were instrumental, this tribal system resembled a series of separately negotiated non-aggression pacts between a centre and its tributaries. Centres were unable to control the movements and actions of their subjects but were able to mount military campaigns to revenge affronts or discipline wayward tributaries, campaigns in which both raiding groups and tributaries participated.

Bone and Ternate differed in some important respects. Diasporas in both cases were instrumental to the expansion of their spheres. In the case of Ternate, aristocrats settled in eastern Sulawesi to represent the Sultan and to keep a close eye on local elites. In the case of Bone, the expansive diaspora of aristocrats and traders was not as closely linked to the main centre of power, and was accompanied by a dissemination of the Bugis language and customs beyond the area of Bone’s political influence.

For regional centres, it was essential to ‘manage’ affairs in ways that ensured potential violence would not be directed against themselves, and that tributaries and raiding chiefs did not form alliances against the centre. For this reason, it was necessary to direct violence outwards towards the periphery, by allowing tributaries and aristocrats with their armed followers to conduct their activities away from the centre. Eastern Sulawesi with its three small maritime polities of Buton, Tобelo and Banggai was situated between Bone and Ternate’s spheres; it consequently felt the effects of raiding/trading groups from both centres and had to look to them for protection - with fluctuating success.

In 1743, a treaty was negotiated by Ternate to resolve a conflict between the two tributaries Banggai and Tobelo, so both could participate in a punitive expedition led by Ternate. The final clause of this treaty, stipulating that the Sultan receive a share of any booty acquired, is clear evidence that he condoned such random activity but was closely related to the formation and functioning of regional spheres of influence and politics.

Taming pirates

With the advent and expansion of the colonial state in the early nineteenth century, raiding was branded a criminal activity to be eliminated. The Dutch had to deal not only with piracy but with a political and economic system which included raiders and other mobile populations. Raiding was a way of living, increasing wealth and wasting war that occurred on a large scale in the eastern archipelago during the decades of the eighteenth century, at the time of Prince Nuku’s war against the VOC.

In the 1820s and 1830s, several unsuccessful attempts were made to transform semi-organized raiding groups into sedentary traders by allowing negotiation and the provision of land. The largest was that of Nuku’s successor, Raja Jalohe, who was given land on the north coast of Seram. Here thousands of his subjects who had taken up a naming existence during the Nuku War were to settle on a permanent basis. Lack of food and suspicion of continuing contact with active raiding chiefs brought the experiment to an abrupt end.

Two similar projects on a smaller scale were undertaken by the colonial government to reestablish and pacify the Tobelo around Flores, also descendants of Nuku’s followers. The first was carried out by Daeng Magassing, an aristocrat from Bonerate, a small island to the south of Sulawesi with longstanding connections to maritime raiders. He used his ‘local’ knowledge and status to form alliances with raiding groups and resettle them on Tanah Jumpea. This tiny island to the south of Selayar had become depopulated due to frequent attacks. Here the resettled raiders were to engage in agriculture and live in peace under the protection of the Dutch.

In 1830, fifteen Tobelo chiefs signed a peace treaty, reinforced by oath, with Daeng Magassing. Only three years later, however, it was evident to the colonial authorities that the project had failed and that Daeng Magassing himself was engaging in acts of piracy. Supplies the Dutch had subsidised.

A second attempt to ‘tame’ the Tobelo was made by Dutch agent Jan Nicholas Vosmaer, who opened a trading post on Sulawesi’s east coast in the 1830s. He was supported by the colonial government and enjoyed the patronage of a powerful chief, Tsunama-Dondang, closely linked to Magindanao raiders in northern and eastern Sulawesi. Vosmaer’s trading post was to serve both as a base to drive Tobelo away from the coast and as a means to force the traders kith and kin beyond Dutch control. Vosmaer negotiated a treaty with many of the same Tobelo chiefs as had Daeng Magassing, but his untimely death prevented this venture from succeeding. Had Vosmaer lived, it is doubtful whether he would have been able to ‘tame’ the pirates, since his own safety depended on his alliance with a chief who was involved in raiding networks. These early attempts to transform and settle raiders were destined to fail as long as the Dutch had only limited control over the sea and lacked the forces needed to prevent alliances between raiders and political elites.

Anti-piracy campaigns

The presence of ‘pirates’ was one of the main justifications cited for the maritime expansion of the colonial state that occurred in eastern Indonesia in the second half of the nineteenth century. The menace of ‘pirates’ for raiders were aban doned and naval campaigns were launched against the Magindanao and Balangkang in particular, whose large sea tribes struck terror in coastal populations across maritime Southeast Asia. But the Dutch did not rely on the use of force alone, since it proved ineffective in the 1880s. Anti-piracy campaigns in eastern Sulawesi were no longer conducted with European ships but with Ternatean kora koraks that could enter shallow coasts and creeks and had the necessary flexibility to chase small craft. Local rulers and aristocrats were heavily fined if caught maintaining connections with Tobelo or other raiders. The last Tobelo raiders were transported back to Ternate in 1860.

Incidence of piracy abated after the 1880s. Interestingly, the next resurgence of piracy occurred in the 1930s as part of a regional rebellion against the central government that controlled most of southern Sulawesi. Many hilltop forts used in defense against the Tobelo were once again re-occupied, while island populations in particular became vulnerable to tribute demands by local rulers. The Indonesian state, just as the colonial state had done half a century earlier, established control anew over the seas through an adroit use of force and negotiation with rebel leaders. Given this history, it may be appropriate to question whether there is any connection between the present resurgence of piracy and the weakening of the centralised state with the fall of Suharto and, more to the point, if the reassertion of historical patterns requires the state to abandon its over-reliance on strong-arm tactics to negotiate anew with regional power holders?

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